

Daltri Journals  
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ISSN 2321-5437

# JOURNAL OF TRIBAL INTELLECTUAL COLLECTIVE INDIA

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**Title:** Revisiting Tribal Studies in India: An Epistemological Perspective

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**Source:** Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India (ISSN 2321 5437), Vol.1 Issue 1 No.1, pp.1 to 14, June 2013

**Published by:** Daltri Journals

**URL:** <http://www.daltrijournals.org/JTICI/article1.html>

**Accessed on:**

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The Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India engages with tribal life world. It is a joint endeavour by academics, critical tribal social workers and tribal activists towards a critical theoretical engagement with contemporary realities of tribes in India. In part, the goal is to assist us collectively in recognizing the current potential for social justice towards a tribe-sensitive reality. We propose that through dialogue there exists the possibility of evolving alternative ideas and paradigms about protection, promotion and preservation of tribes in India.

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## REVISITING TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

ALEX AKHUP

### Abstract

*Tribal study (ies) has theoretical foundation in evolutionist theoretical constructs of 'civilization' and 'the other'. Its historiography, methods, scope and practices are located in the colonial construct constituting also a paternalistic structural framework of the modern state. Moreover, it provides a methodological premise for state ascription of culture, identity and citizenship. This paper makes an attempt to understand Tribal Studies as viewed from the epistemology of 'location in the field'. It revisits the colonial approach, methods and fieldwork processes and argues for an embedded theorization process, unconventionally positioned here as the 'reverse anthropology' approach.*

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**Keywords:** *Epistemology, Emerging Trends, Tribal Studies, North East, Post Colonial*

### Introduction

As an epistemological approach, I consider important to state the position of my location at the very start of this paper. This location becomes the basic unit of my analysis, an epistemological standpoint, the lens through which I see, reflect, act and understand myself, culture, society and state. I define this lens as a context embedded epistemology where contextualization process becomes a methodological imperative and a scientific method is informed by a congruency between the data, methods, theories and value. In its empirically arrived-at conceptual understanding, this methodological location has foundations in upholding life, survival and culture (read here as tribes) often instrumentally classified as clan (descent), culture (language), polity (self-rule) and territory; *jal jungal zameen* within the larger understanding of knowledge, ethics and power. This location engenders a perspective that critiques the conventional structure and process of how knowledge gets constructed, defining what is legitimate and what is not legitimate with a corresponding structure of social and cultural relationship spanned across waves of colonial (external) history. Situated within this circumstance, tribal epistemology is an intrinsic part of an embedded lived experience. This experience is expressed in constant struggle to define and redefine power and relationship in terms of contextual knowledge informed by the ethic of the struggle. In specific, the ethics of the struggle draws its strength from justice, liberty, equality and fraternity as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Moreover, the state as a democratic, secular, rational and constitutional institution has a political responsibility to safeguard self-rule and customary rights; village and/or community right to land and resources and local governance processes. A village should be the supreme unit of authority as enshrined in Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). In other sense, it is a struggle for freedom from the colonial construct, objectification and domination; a struggle to protect,

nurture and negotiate a space for life, land, culture, identity and territory in the processual and emerging socio political context.

In fact, going by existing repository of knowledge, the domination of the colonial approach in tribal studies is evident across the concerned disciplines such as Social Anthropology and Sociology. In particular, the works of the administrators, missionaries, anthropologists and social workers/nation builders located broadly within defined theoretical frameworks dominate the categorization process of tribe and caste vis-a-vis state and citizenship. They all conform to the colonial knowledge enterprise in some way and are still very important constructs that shape conventional conceptualization process and reality of tribes. In that way, tribal studies as a 'field' is subjected to layers of structures and processes vividly observable from the colonial times. Such a trend renders very little space for the emergence of consciousness and realization of people's struggle. Situated within this circumstance, this paper revisits and repositions tribal epistemology, particularly in the light of on-going state-society debates where development and nation-state discourse is becoming increasingly dominant.

The framework of analysis draws strength from my subjective encounter with tribal studies; research and its varied processes. In the process of this engagement, I realised that a meaningful pedagogical approach in teaching research, theory and processes counts much on contextualization and reflexivity. For example, I need to redefine researcher-researched duality considering the importance of creating academic space for an alternative. This position needs to be stated and recognized in the meta-domains of knowledge production and knowledge enterprise. In fact, my reality manifests a paradigm shift: researched as researcher; a post colonial approach in some sense. In the light of this paradigm shift, I consider it important to re-confirm pedagogical approaches grouped broadly into two; a) 'positivist' (as 'banking method' in Freire, 1970) and b) 'constructivist' (as 'conscientization' in Freire, 1979 and 'experience is pedagogical' in Dewey, 1897). The former one refers to a dogmatic imposition process through a lecture method and the latter is an experiential academic engagement, where learning, understanding and theorization are contextual and reflexive. The emphasis therefore is on the experiential method. This approach immediately re-evokes the question of 'insider-outsider' debates. However, this question should not be interpreted in a hierarchical sense but more in relative sense. It should be seen as an emerging perspective from within that challenges any form of colonial domination; ethical consideration here being fundamental. For example, it questions hegemonizing process of the dominant and the coercive state and argues for democratic rights, social justice, and egalitarian social ethos. Given this perspective, the approach of 'theorization from within' relocates research processes; teaching-learning, fieldwork and analysis to the lived experience of the people. It suggests a movement of engagement beyond the confines of objective-subjective binary constructs so as to revisit understanding of power relationships, taking into consideration an ethical unit often considered insignificant in the understanding of the dominant and quantitative; a qualitative approach in sense. The emerging methodological question moves beyond the focus of 'who should be the researcher' or 'what should be the method'. It is a question about the ethic, purpose and perspective of the research engagement. Does the rationale of the research satisfy the ethics of the researched in question? In fact, it is rightly said that social research cannot be understood only within the focus of 'what it is' (scientific method) or academic engagement aiming at establishing 'a trend' (scientific trend) of a

social phenomenon. The process of understanding 'what it is' has an element of 'what it should be', the ideological prescription (Oommen, 1997).

My engagement in social research focusing on the reality of tribes or 'scheduled tribes' as a field of study, North East context in particular, is motivated by a belief in knowledge; knowledge as power (empowerment), an answer to change and transformation; a Socratic approach in sense. Being located within the state context of diversity, multiculturalism and pluralism one is confronted with a dynamic reality; political structures and processes of inter and intra relationship, contested boundaries, issues of intersectionality, citizenship, rights and collective identity. This given circumstance indicates the existence of a dynamically layered (horizontal) structural process as a by-product of the external eminent structures (vertical) and processes, arousing a discomfort (challenge) within me in my research engagement process. This discomfort is an intrinsic part of the circumstance of my location; 'that I am a tribe myself'; my tribe and clan precedes my political identity as a citizen'. However, my formal orientation being located mainly within the colonial pedagogical framework of the 'field', method and theories, every move I make in my understanding is a product of dialectics between my reality and the colonial theorization process. I don't claim that such methodological challenges are new in the social science of the region. In fact, as reported in social anthropology in the context of India, the issue confronting the understanding of 'field' and method; participant observation or ethnography, in particular, is as old as the social science discipline itself. This methodological problematic is an integral part of the evolutionary trajectory which finds its connection to the tradition of Bronislaw Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Fredrik Barth and even Edmund Leach, anthropologists who are recognised for extensive fieldwork since 1920s. In particular, the realization of the methodological challenges in fieldwork processes through 'participant observation', as a method to research 'one's own society' is as old as the pioneer Indian social anthropologist, M.N. Srinivas (Oommen, 2008). Nevertheless, the ensuing discussion had unravelled the understanding of the 'field' as dynamic and complex in the caste ridden Hindu social structure. Therefore, the question of who is the researcher/s; the location of the researcher and the field are important to be stated explicitly. Moreover, such challenges have also informed the general theoretical understanding often referred to as structural-functionalist in Social Anthropology (Pfeffer, 2002). In fact, the available monographs can be neatly grouped within this theoretical formulation. Besides as generally observed, understanding of self, society and state and the world around in academia proceed primarily from western political philosophies and science. Nevertheless, it is also observed that initial efforts toward contextualization of theory and understanding the science of dynamism and reflexivity have been made, although sporadically. Towards this direction, one can locate theorization process broadly within two trends; a) ideational and b) experiential. The former one proceeds from conceptual (ideal type) to the particular and the latter one refers to experiential knowledge, theorization from below. Guru, 2012 is a case in point. In fact, Guru while engaging on, 'theoretical Brahmins and empirical Sudras', argues that the former approach has been the tool of the dominant caste to perpetuate their status. Here power becomes knowledge. Besides, we are also aware of theorization in academics emphasising the empirical and lived experience since the very formative stage of social anthropology. In particular, the approach of Evans-Pritchard who for the first time brought in the Nuer's viewpoint in social anthropology and political theory in 1940s is a case towards this trend.

## **Emerging Trends in Tribal Studies**

Based on readings from available literature, it is observed that tribal study is a specified field of Anthropology and/or social anthropology. The history of tribal studies in India can be traced back to the formation of *Asiatic Society* by Sir William Jones in 1774, which became Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1784 (Xaxa, 2003 and Patnaik in Sukant and Patnaik, 2008). In general, historical trajectory of the discipline is usually viewed into three historical phases, a) formative; 1874 to 1919, b) constructive; 1920-49, and c) analytical; 1950 onwards. The first period is the initial phase of anthropology in India where tribe as a culture came into focus as field of social anthropology. A formal ascription and categorization process of tribes got initiated within census framework as seen in the works of R.R. Risley and A.R. Grierson. This trend of work generated the importance of monographic works on specific tribes. The second period is marked by the emergence of Indian scholars and the establishment of discipline and the method as viewed from the Indian context. The period marked the movement of a discipline towards analytical or action-oriented approach studies. The Anthropological Survey and Tribal Research Institutes set up after Independence generated lots of ethnographic data on tribes in India (Xaxa, 2003). In general, it is observed that sociology and social anthropology have moved along closely (refer Sharma and Oommen, 2000, reprinted in 2002 and Chacko, 2005) in tribal studies in India. The above cited works are publications of various papers of *Indian Sociological Society* focusing on caste, class, gender, tribe, ethnicities and nationalities. However, the primary unit of study of anthropologists has been tribal communities. The earliest scholars who constituted mainly of colonial administrators, visitors, travellers, ethnographers and missionaries initiated tribal studies within a colonial perspective. They were mainly interested in satisfying their need, either political or religious, in indulging with tribes of India. However, these studies generated baseline data for administration which were documented as descriptive monographs, inventory handbooks, gazetteers and travelogues (Sukant, 2008: 1). In fact, political, administrative and military strategy of British India went hand in hand with ethnographers. The available monographs indicate that Anthropology and Administrators using ethnographic method, documented the life and culture of the people and particularly the tribes mainly for political reasons since the beginning of twentieth century. Some of the often referred ethnographic works conducted in the context of the colonies are worth mentioning here to indicate methodological trend; 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific' (1922) by Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Coming of Age in Samoa' (1928) by Margaret Mead, 'The Nuer' (1940) by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and 'Naven' (1958) by Gregory Bateson. These works still influence the methodological considerations of the Social Anthropologist in general.

In particular, an overview of the tribal studies in India indicates that since the early part of the twentieth century, coinciding with the establishment of departments of anthropology and also sociology in the university education system in India, tribal studies have occupied a prominent place in academic discussion. This phase in the history of tribal studies witnessed the emergence of Indian ethnographers who did intensive fieldworks among tribal societies (Sukant and Patnaik, 2008). This era initiated contextualization of fieldwork method among tribes. S.C. Roy incidentally is recognized in Indian academia as one of the greatest Indian ethnographer. The main emphasis in these studies lay in bringing local and tribal reality through incisive (personal concern for tribes) perspective and vivid description; subjective ethnography in some sense. In the recent survey (1988-2002) of the trend of tribal studies conducted under the India Council for

Social Science Research (ICSSR), it is observed that social and cultural elements of tribal societies have found major discursive space in the tribal studies (Srivasta and Chaudhury in Atal, 2009: 50-96). One of the many distinguishing features observed in this period is the 'tremendous increase in the number of tribal scholars and anthropologists carrying out studies on their 'own societies' initiating what is defined as 'native anthropology', 'auto ethnography', or 'anthropology at home'. In general, the following trends of perspective on tribal studies as observed in literature can briefly be described as follows;

***Tribe as an Isolate Culture:*** The approach to tribes in India as an 'isolate' entity got its primary articulation from Verrier Elwin and Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf based on fieldwork observation ranging across tribes of Chotanagpur plateau and the North East since 1930s. In specific, Elwin arrived at his conclusion based on the ethnographic study of the *Baigas, Gonds and tribes of Arunachal Pradesh*. "*The Baigas*" (1939) and "*A Philosophy for NEFA*" (1957) are two important works articulating this perspective. Haimendorf too studied the Konyak Nagas, the Apatanis of Arunachal Pradesh, the Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh and Gonds of Adilabad. This approach is closely linked to his formulation of the concept of 'tribal reserve areas'; autonomy with the intent of preservation and protection of tribal culture. This approach has been critiqued as 'ethnographic romanticization' of tribe and culture (Prasad, 2005). However, 'tribes' in India, referred as Adivasis, or scheduled tribes, are the first sections of the society who came into direct confrontation with British India. The lived reality of resistance by the tribes across the Chotanagpur plateau and the North East hill region indicate the historical reality of various tribal societies co-existing in India. Such societies are distinct culturo-political entities. The encounter between the British and the tribal societies over a period of time is reflected in the administrative responses discussed under the concept of 'backward areas', 'partially excluded and excluded area' (Sharma, 2005). However, the state recognition of the tribal societies as distinct political entity came with Nehruvian Panchsheel. Since then, the isolationist approach is more understood within the frame of political integration as defined by the Constitution Article; 244 and 342.

***Tribe-Caste Continuum:*** Tribe-caste continuum is an assimilationist approach of tribes basically propagated by Hindu nationalist. The main proponent G.S. Ghurye, described *Adivasis* or tribes as 'Backward Hindus'. In particular, his work, "*The Scheduled Tribes*", (1943) provides the basic epistemological premise of the assimilationist approach. Ghurye opined that tribes are part of Hindu Society. However, considering the reality of tribes especially of the North East he proposed two pronged strategies of assimilation; social assimilation for the tribes in the Chotanagpur plateau and political integration for the tribes in the North East (Oommen, 2011). Tribe-caste continuum framework became the basis for assimilation of tribes into Hindu society which later found its methodological operationalization in 'sanskritization' by M.N. Srinivas. It is observed that the heterogeneous and sparse nature of tribal society in the country render a dynamic social reorganization process over span of time and place. In this process, tribe-caste continuum is also a reality at certain defined peripheries of the southern and western regions of country where the Hindu social structure is dominant. However, many still hold that change as conceptualized in a hierarchical social mobility is not applicable to tribal societies. Here, 'hinduization' rather than sanskritization has been preferred (Xaxa in Sukant and Patnaik, 2008). In fact, Bhandari further observes that the Mising tribe in Assam have been Hinduised (become Gossain, local revival form of Hinduism in Assam) but they are not identified as a Hindu caste (Sukant and Patnaik, 2008).

**Political Integration:** Political integration can be considered as a statist approach. The basic principle of integration is defined in the panchsheel as a foreward by Jawaharlal Nehru in the 'Philosophy of NEFA', (1957) by Verrier Elwin. It is written;

- a) People should be allowed to develop on the lines of their own genius and nothing should be imposed upon them;
- b) Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected;
- c) Induction of too many outsiders into tribal areas should be avoided;
- d) There should be no over-administration of tribal areas and as far as possible work should be done through their own social and cultural institutions; and
- e) The results should be judged not by the amount of money spent but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

The nation-state as a larger political territory accommodates diversity; multi culture and linguistics. Roy Burman is of the opinion that integration should be a 'means and not an end' (Roy Burman in Chacko, 1995: 83-84). Here, tribe is categorised as scheduled tribe, a political administrative term with embedded natural rights (Roy Burman in Bhadra and Bhadra, 2007: 18). The prerogative of scheduling tribe or scheduling areas lies with the state. This categorization lays down a frame of administration and recognition of tribes and tribal areas taking into consideration cultures and customs of the tribes. It is a political strategy of including the tribal society within the Indian national boundary as included in the Constituent Assembly debates (Savvyasachi, 1998). In the present context, Sharma (2010), identifies the shift of focus of government policy and practices from the Nehruvian Panchsheel in 1940, to Tribal Subplan in 1970s to the PESA, 1990s.

**Tribe-Peasant-Class Continuum:** The tribe-peasant-class approach is rooted in village studies which emerged after independence following a general focus of studying villages in social science disciplines from a class perspective. A village was initially studied as a social system which forms a larger part of the society. Robert Redfield's framework (Redfield, 1941, 1955, 1956) of 'little traditions and great traditions' is a relevant example in the analysis of village studies. Redfield did not treat village as an 'isolate' but part of the wider civilization. However, this approach was useful only in understanding the peasant society and village studies in India and exclusively applicable to non-tribal villages. Usually tribal studies treat tribal village as 'microcosm' of tribal society. Tribe is described as an organic social category, self-sustaining society (Bhandari in Sukant and Patnaik, 2008: 44). Among others who talked about tribes and peasants, Bhandari, based on the study made on the Mising tribe in Assam, defines peasants to distinguish it from tribe. He said "thus, we can delineate the fundamental characteristics of the peasant society culturally and economically. Culturally, the peasants are associated with their own local traditions but are intrinsically bound with the great tradition of the elite of a wider society; economically they are land-based subsistence agriculturists, though they may not be self-sufficient. Peasants do claim physical and political protection from the wider society of which they are a part and on which they depend economically" (Bhandari in Sukant and Patnaik, 2008: 47). However, this approach in the present context is usually discussed within political economy perspective, suggesting tribe-class and ethnicity-class continuum, an ideological standpoint against exploitation and subjugation by the state and market. "Discourse of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand" by Susana Devalle (1992) is an important work to understand that articulates this line of inquiry.



**Co-existence Approach:** The historical approach to understanding tribes focuses on the co-existence of societies; tribes and other societies. Here, tribe is considered to be a product of history and not a stage in unilinear evolution; a society within a history. The earliest observation in Indian society indicates the existence of tribe as distinct social section. Among others, this approach is articulated by Andre Beteille in saying that ‘where tribes and civilization co-exist, as in India and the Islamic world, being a tribe has been more a matter of remaining outside of state and civilization, whether by choice or necessity, than of attaining a definite stage in the evolutionary advance from the simple to complex’ (as cited in Xaxa, 1999). Based on his understanding of tribe within the perspective of co-existence, Beteille describes tribes within the understanding of ‘permeability of the boundary’, a post Barthian approach. He cites the example of Bhumij and Bublā as on ‘borderlines’. They could be called either caste or tribe but Juang of Orissa is tribe and Vadama is a caste in Tanjore (Beteille in Sukant and Patnaik, 2008: 38). However, such a theorization is silent about the hierarchical nature of Hindu caste system. It is caste structure that differentiates.

### **Emerging Trends in the North East Context**

As an effort towards universalizing the particular and experiential, let me further engage with challenges confronting tribal studies in the context of North East in particular and rest of tribal areas in general. In fact, tribal studies in general got institutionally established during the British Colonial period: broadly between 1760s and 1890s. In the context of North East, the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826 occupies an important historical landmark. In fact, we are aware of the basic premise of the British colonial establishment in the region: trade and commerce. Therefore, this region historically is an intrinsic part of two historical periods: the colonial period and the post colonial state, India. Today we are also aware of the post colonial North East agenda to some degree. The 'Look East Policy' is a case in point: making Northeast region as a commercial centre for the Southeast Asian region.

### **A Colonial Construct**

A cursory picture of the literature on tribe, ethnic identity and nationality reveals that the British first introduced the concept of identity and ethnicity to describe the people in the region. In their effort to subdue and administer, all the areas in the North East both the hill and valleys, they had to identify and classify the varied groups of peoples in the hills and valleys. ‘Tribe’ as an ethnographic category became an analytical concept for the colonial administrators and ethnographers to identify and describe the people in the region.

In fact, in 1903, Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam, made an official ethnographic project in the then Assam Province (Lyall, 1906: xv). This project with a preconceived methodology initiated fieldwork and publications of a series of ethnographic monographs on tribes in the Assam province. These monographs usually dealt with myths of origins and genealogies, laws and customs, religious system, folklore, language within a general description of the appearance, racial characteristics and geographical distribution of the people. However, the intention of the official ethnographic project – to revisit and document the dying social entity – became a theoretical premise for romanticization of the tribal reality. Romanticization, as a process of colonial and post colonial projects, initiated marginalization of

culture within a 'culture versus civilization' dichotomy. Some of these classical monographs may be referred.

The work, 'The Khasis' (1906) by Maj. P.R.T. Gurdon was the first volume to be completed under the scheme of the official ethnography of the north-east. Gurdon was the Superintendent of the Ethnographic Project in Assam who was well acquainted with the Khasi language. In Manipur and the Naga Hill areas, T.C. Hodson produced two monographs, 'The Meiteis of Manipur' (1908), on the plain inhabitant ethnic group and 'The Naga tribes of Manipur' (1911). In the northern Brahmaputra hill regions, Sir Charles Lyall wrote on 'The Mikirs' (1908) which was followed by a monograph on 'The Kacaris' (1911) in the southern Brahmaputra foothill region by Rev. Sidney Endle. After a year of the first monographic publication, Major A. Play fair also published 'The Garos' (1909), on the hill tribes of the Garo hill areas. On the Naga Hills, 'The Angami Nagas and The Sema Nagas' (1921a, 1921b) by J.H. Hutton and on 'The Lhota Nagas and the Ao Nagas' by J.P. Mills (1922, 1926) became classic monographs. In the southern hill regions, the monograph, 'The Lushai-Kuki Clan' (1912) by Lt. John Shakespeare became very important publications. There is also a monograph, 'Notes on the Thadou Kukis' (1912) authored by William Shaw. The last two monographs on the southern region became very controversial monographs generating specific inter ethnic politics among the tribes in the southern region of the North East. In the context of Manipur, 'The Valley of Manipur' (1800) by William McCulloh and 'Statistical Account of Manipur' (1873) by R. Brown are well referred colonial ethno historical documents. These writings have become today the basic epistemological premise for classification or identification of scheduled tribes.

### **A Post Colonial Construct**

As referred above, there has been a phenomenal growth of academic literature as a simultaneous outcome of the national building process in the context of North East region since the formation of the states in the region. Such literature has covered various specific themes, context and processes such as development, national security, human security, human right and national integration on one side and tribal culture, ethnic worldview, pan tribal ethnic process, generic ethnic political movements including autonomy, self determination and sovereignty. These studies have generated intense academic methodological discussions with regard to perspectives, orientations, disciplines, 'outsider' and 'insider' closely linked to the issue of 'scientific objectivity' and 'social responsibility' (Pakem in Agrawal, 1996, pp.11-20, and also Morton, 1972 in Sollors, 1996: 325-369). Therefore, one can observe emergence of alternative methodology in terms of the social and political location of the author. In this line of thinking, 'epistemological community' of Mohanty in Bhambra and Margree, 2010, p.61 is very relevant for ethno history. Therefore, it is clear that literature has an increasing influence on the politics of the nation building process and multi ethnic reality within the state premise (Bhadra and Bhadra, 2007).

Drawing conclusions from the repository of literature in this context, it is observed that the colonial epistemological tradition as passed on to the emerging Indian academicians (initially sociologists and social anthropologists) has today enlarged its approach extending to history, political science and even political economy in the recent times primarily located within the national integration approach. Therefore, it is seen that academicians and academic literature is

an integral part of policy formulation and practice. However, in this process, there has been a constant tension between understanding and defining the tribes as a 'politico-administrative' category (as scheduled in the Constitution) and 'culturo-political' entity. Frequently used concepts such as 'primitive tribes', 'backward areas', 'scheduled tribes' and 'scheduled areas', 'partially excluded' and 'excluded areas' reflect tensions between 'one political national identity' and 'cultural identity' of tribes as citizens of the state with cultural and customary prerogative within the federal state system. The concept of autonomy, self rule, self determination, homeland and subnationalism are vehemently used simultaneously to articulate the organic ethnic process in this region. Some even considered the concepts of proto national and infra nationalism to refer to the emerging process of ethnicity (Burman in Kabui, 1985). These discussions over a period of time have evolved certain boundary elements between cultural identity and political identity, the former referring to the specific culture (as tribe or ethnic group) or regional identity and the latter referring to the Indian national identity. But the fact is that the people of these areas are a subject of multifaceted identity; as a tribe, a village, state, linguistic, culture and an Indian. This socio-political situation expressed in various political assertions and resistance got initiated with the formation of Naga Club as seen in the literature (Nag, 2002 and Joykumar, 2005). This historical process has generated academic ethnohistory as a natural multi ethnic response to the emerging political situation of the state (Shimray, 2007 and Lal Dena, 1990 as examples of such an approach).

Therefore, it is noted here that there is a diversity of literature with various approaches such as integration, assimilation, isolation and historical co-existence. Each of these approaches has its own concepts such as tribe (scheduled tribe/non scheduled tribe), ethnic group, nationality or nation. Tribe and ethnicity are state concepts while nationalities and nations refer to the proto nations claiming indigenous character within or outside the state. The concept of indigeneity is defined by the territorial and historical precedence. Therefore, one is able to indicate the social and political location of the author based on the concepts applied. A majority of researchers and social activists, being located within the nation state premise, take the nation state perspectives on understanding the people of the North East. Mukhim (2010) is a case in point. This article describes the emerging Naga political issues, as an 'old saga'. A similar view is also articulated in Phanjoupam (2010). However, interestingly, Haksar (2010) approached this issue as 'A Constitutional Crisis' vis-à-vis political Naga political solution and Bhatia (2010) approached it as a 'Justice Denied to Tribes in the Hill Districts of Manipur'. The latter two articles, though non-local, invited varied discussions across the ethnic groups and academicians in Manipur highlighting the intensity of ethnic discourse in the region. In the subsequent discussions, JJ Roy Burman (2010) as rejoinder to Bhatia vividly approaches it as an issue of 'Constitutional Representation' of tribes in the state of Manipur and Laldena (2010), a local historian, further highlights the need for greater autonomy and tribal right of land.

As an overarching methodological discussion in the North East context, Sanjib Buruah's 'Against Constructionism' (2003) argues against an ethnonationalism movement, emerging trend in the Naga political movement. Buruah (2003) is an affirmation of the integrationist methodological premise which has its root in the Constituent Assembly. In the recent past Sajal Nag, a historian, has also come up as a strong supporter of integration methodological approach in his well known historical works; 'India and North-East; Mind, Politics and the Process of Integration 1946-1950' (1998) and 'Contesting Marginality; Ethnicity, Insurgency and

Subnationalism in North-East India' (2002). This perspective perceives ethnic assertion and resistance as a historical struggle for inclusive history. Besides, Bhaumik (2009), as a recent trend, has lucidly given an analytical description of the political tension between the state and society in the region positioned from the perspective of a 'troubled periphery'.

Therefore, the line of discussion and analysis in the context of the North East reveal that ethnicity, as a construct and reality, has been more used to refer to specific cultural and political social groups. 'Ethnicity' both as cultural specifics and political process and action is increasingly applied in social science in North East. T.K. Oommen (Sharma and Oommen, 2000) prefers to use the word 'ethnies' to refer to the cultural and political distinctive communities, like the tribes in North East. However, his definition of ethnicity as 'disintegration of culture and territory' has limited application in the context of North East who hold territory and homeland concept very closely. However, as a general trend the concepts 'nationality' or 'nation' are used elaborately. For instance, B.K. Roy Burman preferred to use the concept of nation of national identity and nation society qualifying adivasis' political expressions (process of identity expansion) as 'infra' and 'proto- nationalism' (Burman, 1983B: 1174). However, considering the emerging use of the concept ethnicity as an analytical concept in North East, Burman considered that in North East India, in agreement with Glazer and Moynihan, ethnic groups are a hereditary group with shared values, style of symbol of identity and consciousness of a kind (Burman in Bhadra and Bhadra, 2007:10-23). Here, he defines ethnicity from functional structuralist perspective locating its root to Dahrendorf (1968) – the premise of conviviality as a basic driving force (similarity with Barthian approach).

As an attempt to universalise the particulars in tribal studies, below are given brief descriptions of some of the observable perspectives, concepts and frameworks emerging from the North East India context;

***Embedded Ethnic Life World, Peoplehood and Culture:*** ethnicity is embedded in the life world of the social realities, a totality of culture that constitutes the life style of the people. Biswas (2005) is one such work in this approach. However, this approach should be differentiated from the earlier monographs. In this perspective ethnicity becomes an objective reality; a reality in the process of 'being' and 'becoming', the element of essential attributes in the state of flux in time and place. Thus, the worldview becomes the epistemological premise of reading the meaning of the world; life on this earth and after death (Burman, 1994: 4-8). The objectivity of the reality is confirmed through its ability to exert influence in the mind of the individual persons who ascribed to it in the context of the state and other ethnic groups and individuals. Closely related to the objective reality are consciousness, feeling and bonding attached to the collective individuals. Consciousness is the subjective reality of the individual in the condition of its response to the objective reality, the ascribed ethnic identity. It is usually expressed in what one 'says', and 'does' in the cultural context.

***Nation and Nationalities:*** an articulation of the ethnic groups also described as proto nations having history and culture occupying a specific territory. Among tribes, the articulation of Naga Nationhood, dating back to pre independence is one such among this perspective. This articulation is based on the concept of nation and nationality. Nation in simple sense understood as people with specific history and culture who have been here before the coming of the state.

Ethnicity in this context is closely related to the assertion for recognition of history, culture and territory, a homeland. Therefore, such ethnicity processes are based on autonomy, self determination and even sovereignty. However, it should be noted that there are various other similar such articulations which have come with the coming of the state in the region. There is an emergence of academic literature along this perspective such as Vashum (2000) and Shimray (2007)

**State Premise:** ethnicity is considered in terms of a politico-administrative and legal entity; scheduled tribes or tribal areas. India as a principle recognises ‘unity in diversity’, a multicultural perspective. The inclusion of various legal and administrative systems with regard to the scheduled tribes can be understood as the broad frame of the state on ethnicity (Sixth scheduled and article 371A, 371C included). This perspective is also seen in the state reorganization process (Syiemlieh in Datta Ray and Agrawal, 1994: 24-36), and also the district delimitation. It considers the basic reality of the ethnicity in the North East and Indian social and political structure. In recent times, there have been lots of academic articulations within this perspective with specific focus on the inability of the state structure such as Subir Bhowmick, (2010) and Sajal Nag (1990). The question of the compatibility between ethnicity and state is a rigorous academic discussion emerging in the North East.

**Modernization and Development:** ethnicity as a ‘hindrance to development’ (Thomas et al, 2001). Ethnicity is considered as ‘primordial’, ‘residuals’, ‘old saga’ that would eventually disappear with the process of development. This approach is similar to colonial perception of ethnicity as non-western political phenomenon - negative, primitive, communal, anti-change, and anti modernization from development perspective (Pye, 1958: 469 and Geertz, 1963 as quoted in Oommen, 1997). Along this line of thinking, there are also authors who consider ‘constructionism’ or ‘ethnotionalism’ as the root cause of the problem in the North East region.

**Epistemological Community:** going by the subjectivism of people; with a focus on collective than individual, it can be observed that the day-to-day lived experience occupies a foundational value located in a context, time, space and history. It constitutes the embedded framework of knowledge, worldview, beliefs and value. This experience is transmitted primarily through stories, folklores and narratives (oral in nature). In fact, narratives provide the main entry into the lifeworld and subjectivism of the acting people where the community is conceived both as the depository and repository of knowledge. This epistemological framework; of the experience, embedded, of time and space is fundamentally different from the top-down, colonial epistemological framework as observed in tribal studies. The principal contradiction between these two contesting perspectives is observed empirically in the field taking various methodological and theoretical dimensions. To an empathetic seeker of embedded meanings, listening to the daily life struggles of tribes and adivasis unravels the embedded worldview, knowledge system, ethic and relational power structure and processes. It orients the seeker to comprehend the lifeworld where generalized structures and processes define culture and identity and to which they draw strength to resist coercion, displacement and marginalization. This culturo-political entity, here referred to as an epistemological community, represents the only or probably the last remaining group who still survives supported by the axiological principles of ethics, aesthetics, natural justice and self determination.

## Conclusion

In final analysis, let me state that tribal studies can be understood as one specific unit of Social Science/social studies. In specific, it constitutes a part of the larger engagement in philosophy of methodology; paradigms of inquiry, field, methods and processes. Building an understanding of the relationship and distinctions between philosophical positions and research strategies is an essential part of the research process and integral to orienting methodology and processes best suited for a research project, thesis or dissertation'. Tribal study thus has a conceptual framework which is defined by the location. It asserts a space for congruency between the location within context, field, method and processes in arriving at an empirical knowledge. The basic underlying premise of social science is the establishment of empirical truth. The emphasis is made on 'how do I come to know what I know' referred here as epistemology. This emphasis is built on the assumption that there is the existence of a reality, referred to here as ontology. In a more concrete sense, one is looking at understanding and arriving at knowledge within a given framework. This framework is described by an intricate relationship between the perspective, location within context, methods and processes.

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